

Monday, December 18, 2006

On the last night of the 109th Congress, two small encounters demonstrated for me the grandeur of democracy in America:

Saturday, December 9th: It is midnight -- nearly ten hours after the 109th Congress was scheduled to complete its business, adjourn and fade into the history books. Fade is the operative word here. The Republican majority is adding dozens of resolutions to the agenda in their dwindling moments of control of Congress. Except that the dwindling moments seem endless. We are told adjournment will be anywhere between 2 am and 3 am -- maybe even later. We are groping for the finish line.

In the House Democratic Cloakroom, I sit -- sprawl is more like it -- with a small group of colleagues: Reps. Ed Markey (MA), Gary Ackerman (NY), David Obey (WI), Melissa Bean (IL). Although we represent different states and varied interests, we all wear the same fatigued expressions. Just on the other side of the Cloakroom doors is the drone of the House. Legislation is wearily announced, legislation is wearily debated, legislation is passed with the thud of a gavel and no recorded vote. Because of the addition of so many last-minute bills, the Republican sponsors seem to have trouble explaining the bills on which we are voting. In some cases, they don't even have copies of the bills they are passing into law.

At one point, the Congressman who is presiding, Rep. Ray Lahood (R-IL), recognizes a Member to bring up a bill with this rare admonishment: "I hope the gentleman is better prepared with this bill than he was with the last."

Back in the Cloakroom, Gary Ackerman and I purchase the last ice-cream cones left in an oversized freezer. I am lounging in a chair, my feet propped on a table, eating in a way that my mother would not have tolerated in my home, no less the House of Representatives.

Then, the incoming Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, stops by. The next time Congress convenes, she will be the third most powerful official in America and arguably the most powerful woman in the world. For now, she chats quietly about the transition, standing over a table strewn with discarded ice cream wrappers and crumbled newspapers, listening to our midnight humor and explaining a bill for which she has been negotiating Floor consideration.

When she leaves, I think about an encounter I had earlier that night. During a "Dinner Break," two members of my staff and I raced to an inexpensive Thai restaurant eight blocks from the Capitol Building. (I like the place because most of the entrees are \$9.95 or less.)

The "Dinner Break" is really a "Dinner Gamble." At any moment, probably in the time between

the arrival of my plate and the first forkful of food in my mouth -- my pager can buzz with the jarring report that votes are in progress and I have fifteen minutes to rush back to the Floor.

Tonight, however, there was no such interruption. And just as we were exiting the restaurant, the current Speaker of the House, Dennis Hastert, enter. Two hours earlier, he had presented his farewell address to the House as Speaker.

"That was a terrific speech, Mr. Speaker," I said as we shook hands. Diners around us look nonchalantly from their plates. As if the Speaker of the House usually sits with them for a \$9.95 Chicken Stir Fry Special.

"Thanks very much. And good luck in the majority." He headed to a table, and I returned to the Capitol.

These two brief encounters -- with incoming Speaker Nancy Pelosi and outgoing Speaker Dennis Hastert -- remind me not to take for granted what our Framers constructed. Where else could power shift so profoundly -- and so ordinarily -- from one Party to the next? On his last night as Speaker of the House in legislative session, Dennis Hastert showed up with no fanfare at an unassuming Thai restaurant, and wished me well in the majority. And Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker-Designate, stood over a group of Members as we munched on ice cream and slurped some sodas.

Not a shot fired. Not a punch thrown. Just a few dozen bills added to an agenda, a few additional sleepless hours, a 2:30 am adjournment, and an 8 am flight back to New York.

Where else could a former Town Councilman have encounters like these, at the very moment of a peaceful transition like this?

Only here.

See you in the majority.

Posted by: SI